Journal of Educational Research and Practice
2011, Volume 1, Issue 1, Pages 67–69

DOI: 10.5590/JERAP.2011.01.1.05

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Book Review

Navigating Through the Storm: Reinventing Education for Postmodern Democracies, by Aharon Aviram. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishing, 2010, ISBN: 978-9087909772, 417 pp. $49.00, paperback.

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Aharon Aviram, a professor in the Department of Education and chair of the Center for Futurism in Education at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheva, Israel, expanded his 1999 work *Navigating in the Storm* into this volume. Aviram credits the new volume as the culmination of reflections on his prior work, critiques, and experiences in the decade since. Aviram systematically develops a logical and detailed call to reinvent education.

In the annex to the text, Aviram interestingly explains his intellectual journey; he describes his process as "conversations and 'confrontations'" (p. 327), which is an apt description of the approach in the book. The arguments presented within are thoroughly developed and each counter argument addressed. The presentation of arguments deters any other interpretations, as through skillful language and voluminous detail, Aviram counters points before they have been raised. Where that technique appears to be weak or if too little detail is available, rhetoric is used to undermine opposing views (¶1, p. 249). Rhetoric and clichés do not, however, undermine the strong writing and tremendous level of detail presented in the text. The writing is detailed, almost to a fault, but balanced with useful metaphors. Aviram skillfully uses language to paint pictures of the history of education and to develop the setting for his proposal for education.

To begin the argument for reinventing education, the assumptions underpinning the work are explained. The text elucidates some of the challenges faced by members of the educational community that, for the most part, are true of education in the United States, if not the world. Some of these are mildly overstated, but in their essence ring true. From these assumptions stem the four key claims developed in the book referred to as the anomaly hypothesis. This hypothesis drives the organization of the first part of the book, a critique of modern education.

To support his call for a new system of education, Aviram identifies and deeply explains how an educational system that struggled to meet the needs of modern society has failed to meet the needs of postmodern society. He offers elegant summaries of the history of the four key claims, with enough detail and relevant research to be a primer for a scholar new to the ideas presented. As a proponent of integrating information and computer technology (ICT), it is understandable that Aviram highlights failings in the current system—lococentricity, for example—that can be addressed with ICT. Strong arguments for distance learning are presented, and the model for the reinvented educational system relies heavily on ICT.

While the book promises to set forth a plan for reinventing education, that plan is only sketched in the book. The text identifies a model, an outline for an ideal system of education, but the level of detail in earlier chapters is lacking. "I intentionally circumvented many practical issues" (p. 237), the author wrote. This was disappointing as the depth with which earlier arguments were made set high expectations for the plan's description. The ideal education described—autonomy-oriented

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education (AOE)—aligns with the psychological theory of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (self-actualization as the ultimate goal) and logically follows from the earlier chapters in the book.

Like the other arguments presented in the book, the arguments for AOE are well constructed even if there is an absence of the more practical "how to." The proposed plan eliminates barriers to higher education such as exams and compulsory secondary schools. Secondary schools would be replaced with "educational liaison and guidance centers" of some format (p. 245). Aviram acknowledges that universities would be required to lower the standards for first-year students, but that each student would be encouraged to experiment and find his or her own way under the guidance of a mentor. He further acknowledges that mentors capable of this level of guidance would be hard to find. In AOE, the students themselves would be responsible for their own educational path.

According to Aviram, students are more capable of making educational decisions for themselves because of the disappearance of childhood. His arguments are well constructed but beg an important part of the issue: physiology. While the media and changes in parenting may socially blur the lines between adult and child, the development of the human body, specifically the brain, does not. The brain continues to develop into the mid-twenties, with the frontal lobe (the part of the brain responsible for reasoning) developing most during adolescence. Aviram uses changes in legal rights of children to buttress his arguments for the blurring line of child and adult, yet it is also the criminal justice system asserting that adolescents are less morally culpable based on the physiological developments of the brain. As his arguments were constructed in a social framework rather than a physiological one, Aviram has elegantly defined the situation in a way that works for his proposal.

A concern regarding the social construction of AOE is the possibility for social reproduction. As it was described, AOE requires that students obtain "the minimal knowledge required for survival and success in life" (p. 215). Writing from the U.S. state with the highest achievement gap, the question of who is determining what minimum is acceptable is worrisome. Even more troubling is a later assertion that Aviram's reinvented educational system "does not translate into a ban on home schooling, charter schools, or private schools. [He believes] that a liberal state should not limit the rights of its citizens to educate their children by themselves" (p. 288). Earlier in the book, Aviram asserts that a criticism of education for autonomy is conscious social reproduction (p.66). In the final chapter of the book, Aviram acknowledges the emotional reactions that educators will have to his reinvention of education. What is unclear is whether the visceral reaction is to the challenges faced by postmodern education, the plan for AOE, or the possible ramifications for the currently underserved students who would likely be more underserved through AOE.

While the text offers insights into most aspects of the current educational landscape, it is hard to recommend without reservation because of instances of harsh judgment and discriminatory language. For a student or researcher looking for an intelligent debate on educational goals or philosophy, educational content or curriculum, organizational structure of schools, or the disappearance of childhood, I suggest this book. While it presents interesting ideas about a possible direction for educational reform, they are no more practical than the ones that Aviram suggests have failed. After reading *Navigating Through the Storm*, I am no better prepared to navigate the challenging educational landscape, but it was a thought-provoking discussion of the relevant issues. In fact, *Understanding the Storm* may be a better title for this work.

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